

Electronic Media and the Family: Risks and Opportunities

- 94% of young Canadians have Internet access at home.
- 50% of Canadian Grade 11 students have their own Internet-connected computer, separate and apart from the family,
- as do 20% of those in Grade 4 (http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseII/key_findings).

Canadian children and youth are wired – or wireless, as the case may be. They are surfing, gaming and text messaging at unprecedented levels: often without any parental supervision. Canada's young people are able to connect to each other and to the world around them with astonishing speed, frequency and, anonymity. As such, they are exposed to a range of risks and opportunities that no previous generation of children have ever experienced.

According to a 2005 survey conducted by the Media Awareness Network, on an average week day, Canadian students spend:

- 54 minutes instant messaging
- 50 minutes downloading and listening to music
- 44 minutes playing online games
- 30 minutes doing school work (http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/research/YCWW/phaseII/key_findings).

*NB some of these activities are simultaneous.

Family lens

How families allocate access to technology within the household impacts use. In a review of the research literature on media use and families, Arlene Moscovitch maintains that “children and youth who have their own Internet-connected computer spend twice as much time online as those who use equipment shared by the whole family” (www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/media07.html).

But, just how much time is too much?

Research and public opinion is divided over what constitutes ‘reasonable’ or ‘healthy’ access to these technologies. Unprecedented rates of obesity, on-line gambling (www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/gambling.html), cyber-bullying and commercial exploitation speak to the risks of unfettered access. And yet, having a computer in the home is also associated with higher student academic achievement. (www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsdclp/publications/2004-002625/page04.shtml).

Clearly, this age of connectivity is a two-sided coin. Families have an important role to play in both seizing the opportunities and minimizing the risks that come with exposure to new technologies. Setting limits and negotiating time and space use are just some of the ways that adults can help children navigate this omnipresent feature of modern living.